

ENGLISH TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE ROLE OF CLASSROOM INTERACTION TO PROMOTE STUDENTS' COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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DOI: 10.7813/jll.2015/6-2/43

Received: 30 Jan, 2015

Accepted: 13 Mar, 2015

ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate English teachers' perceptions on EFL classroom interaction to promote students' communicative competence. Eighteen General Secondary Teachers participated in this study. Interview technique was employed to elicit their responses. Findings indicated that classroom interaction has not fully directed to promote students' communicative competence.

Key words: classroom interaction, communicative competence, interaction strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

In this study, the term "classroom interaction" encompasses everything that happens in the classroom that involves communication and is defined broadly to include "... not only to those exchanges involving authentic communication but to every oral exchange that occurs in the classroom, including those that arise in the course of formal drilling" [1]. Teachers need to orchestrate classroom interaction to allow students to interact with both the teacher and fellow students through turn-taking, to receive feedback, to ask for clarification, and to initiate communication [2], teachers should avoid dominating one-way talk [3] and should invite students' active participation in classroom interaction through turn-taking, feedback, clarification requests, and negotiation to allow students to produce the target language [4].

Research on EFL classroom interaction in Indonesian context suggests that English lessons were teacher-centred and textbook driven [5] dominated by of teacher' talk [6,7,8]. Dominant classroom interaction strategy employed by EFL teachers was display questions [9,10,11]. Open or referential questions that invited students to think aloud to generate sequences of thought and to explore implications were significantly fewer than display questions.

A recent study on teacher-student interaction was conducted by Maulana, Opdenakker, Stroet, and Bosker [12]. Their findings reveal that Indonesian teachers spent most of their time lecturing in front of the class. There is hardly any interaction with students. Most teachers showed little awareness of their students' learning process. They did not pay much attention to students' mistakes and misconceptions. Although Indonesian teachers have been given more autonomy in implementing more active teaching learning practices, many of them have not taken up this opportunity. They are concerned that this might increase their workload because this approach demands more of teachers than whole class lecturing. This study focuses on teachers' perception of their EFL classroom interactions. The results will give some lights why teachers conduct their classroom interaction in a particular way.

2. METHODS

Interview technique was employed as a means to collect the data. The teachers' interview is part of the comprehensive study on EFL classroom interaction in Lower Secondary Schools in Malang, East Java. Eighteen General Lower Secondary Schools English teachers accepted the invitation to participate in the interviews. For confidentiality, each participant was coded with a number and an abbreviation "GE". They consisted of 14 females and 4 males. Seventy percent had a qualification of Bachelors degree in English teaching, while 28% held a Masters degree in English teaching. All qualifications came from local universities in Indonesia. Fifty percent of GE teachers had more than 20 years' experience, 22% had more than 10 years, 5.5% had between 5-10 years, and 5.5% had less than 5 years' experience.

To articulate their viewpoints clearly, informants could choose their preferred language. Most interviews were conducted in Indonesian while two were conducted in English. They were digitally recorded and transcribed *verbatim*. The interviews in Indonesian were translated into English transcripts. To reduce validity and reliability threats, the researcher sent completed transcripts to the participants for clarification.

3. FINDINGS

A) Teachers' attitudes to interacting with students in English

Teachers were asked: "Do you like interacting with students in English?" The majority of GE teachers responded that they liked interacting with their students. The reasons for liking interacting were various. Fifty six percent of GE teachers stated that classroom interaction was important because they could check students' understanding of learning materials. It also could be used to motivate students to have the courage to ask questions about difficult material. Thirty three percent of GE teachers pointed out that interaction in English was important to familiarize students with English vocabulary. Eleven percent of GE teachers asserted that interaction made English lessons interesting.

To sum up the majority of GE teachers report using classroom interaction to check students' mastery of material and to secure students' interest in lessons rather than to build students' competence in speaking English. The rest of the teachers indicated that the purpose of classroom interaction was to get students into the habit of listening to English and trying to speak in English.

B) Activities for teacher-student interaction

When asked about the kind activities GE teachers use for classroom interaction, the most frequent answer was "question and answer sessions" and discussion after reading activities (61%), followed by class presentations (17%), asking students' opinions (11%), and daily routines spoken in English (11%).

The majority of GE teachers use reading comprehension followed by question-answer sessions, and discussion activities after reading texts as activities for teacher-student interaction.

C) Teachers' language choice during teacher-student interaction

When asked whether they use only English (L2) or English mixed with Indonesian (L1) in their classroom interaction, all GE teachers favoured mixing Indonesian and English in their classroom interaction. Fifty percent of GE teachers claimed to use English more than 50% of the time. Another 50% indicated they used English less than 50% of the time. Indonesian was used more than English. The reasons for using Indonesian varied. Sixty seven percent said that Indonesian was used to explain difficult vocabulary. Sixty seven percent GE teachers stated that Indonesian was used to explain grammatical items because they feel more comfortable using Indonesian to ensure students' understanding. Fifty five percent of GE teachers use Indonesian for instructions. After the English version, they translated it into Indonesian. This suggests that English is not being used sufficiently in teacher-student interaction in GE classes.

D) Teacher training in conducting teacher-student interaction

All GE teachers said they had no in-service training in conducting teacher-student interaction. There has been no in-service training which focused on how to conduct effective classroom interaction. Teachers were not familiar with the concept of using effective teacher-student interaction strategies to build students' oral communicative competence.

E) Interaction strategies that teachers used

When asked about kind of classroom interaction strategies that they used, it was revealed that 89% of GE teachers use display questions frequently.

There was use of referential questions in interacting with students, with 44% of GE teachers. Regarding oral corrective feedback, 78% of GE teachers reported that they often corrected students' mistakes in using words, but seldom corrected the contents of students' utterances. Half of them directly corrected the errors, while the other half delayed this until later.

When asked about the use of scaffolding strategy, only 33% of GE teachers claimed that they often scaffold students' utterances and they would do it if required. Limited time was a factor which prevented the other 67% of GE teachers from reformulating, extending or giving model sentences to students' utterances. They reported only giving model sentences to the whole class:

Regarding negotiation moves (asking students to clarify and confirm his or her understanding of students' response), 22% of GE teachers reported that often use negotiation moves, while 78% seldom employed these strategies because students seldom use English.

When asked about speak turn strategy, all GE teachers mentioned they had extended turn frequently in the teacher-student interaction. They felt an obligation to explain the teaching materials to students for example, grammar points or characteristics of texts, or difficult words that students were reading at the time.

When asked whether they gave extended turns to students to express themselves in English by relating lessons to personal experiences or making a reflection of the lesson, only 22.2% of GE teachers said they often did this, while the other 78.8% replied that they seldom gave students the chance to have extended turns.

When asked about whether they completed students' turn, interrupted students' turn, or repeated students' turn, 67% of GE teachers indicated that they seldom completed or interrupted students' turn because they wanted to have less-stressed students and they wanted to ensure smoothness of communication. In contrast, 72% of GE teachers said they often repeated students' contribution or repeated the student's statement themselves so that students could hear a correct response.

Thus, repetition was favoured as a strategy while completion or interruption was not. Finally, 67% GE teachers reported that they gave time (several seconds) for students to formulate their contribution:

The data show that there were strategies of teacher-student interaction which often appeared in GE classes, according to the interviewees among these were: display questions, form-focused feedback, extended teacher turn, and teachers repeating students' contribution, and allowing students to formulate their contribution.

F) Barriers to conducting classroom interaction in English

Teachers encountered three major barriers. The first barrier was concern about the National Examination. As a result, most GE teachers gave little attention to building students' oral communicative competence. Almost all GE pointed out the importance of students' doing well in the National Examination.

An obvious conclusion is that the Indonesian Ministry of Education dictates what happens in EFL classrooms. Teachers concentrated on equipping students with the skills required for the National Examination, mainly reading skills, as it is clear that good results in the National Examination are highly desirable.

The second barrier, reported by 50% of GE, is teachers' lack of fluency in English. Because all the teachers interviewed graduated from local institutions, they felt their oral English was not proficient:

The last barrier that inhibits teacher-student interaction is class size. Sixty seven percent of GE and 50% of IS teachers commented that they had classes of 40 to 48 students. They were unable to interact with all their students:

It seems apparent that barriers to building oral communication competence are both external and internal. External factors are heavily influenced by the policy of Education Ministry which has mandated that the National Examination will be centrally controlled. The internal factors are teachers' own lack of English fluency and difficulties in handling large numbers of students in most classrooms.

G) Barriers for students in interacting in English

In general, GE teachers felt that their students encountered many barriers participating in teacher-student interaction in English. These barriers can be categorised broadly into four groups: linguistic incompetence, anxiety, culture, and supporting environment. Linguistic incompetence includes students' lack of vocabulary and poor pronunciation.

Fifty six percent of GE teachers mentioned inadequate vocabulary as a factor that affected students' interaction. Students cannot communicate well with a teacher without sufficient vocabulary. In addition to a lack of vocabulary, 56% of GE teachers indicated that their students had difficulty because of problems with pronunciation.

Apart from linguistic incompetence, 67% of GE teachers considered their students had anxiety problems when they have to interact in English. Another barrier mentioned by 78% of GE teachers is the influence of Javanese culture, in particular, the impetus to be respectful and obedient to parents and to teachers and not to show off, therefore students would not initiate interaction and would keep quiet unless they were being asked to. Students were also not trying to speak English to avoid being seen as a show off. The last barrier mentioned by 67% of GE teachers is English is only a foreign language in Indonesia; therefore, students are not used to express their ideas in English as it is not spoken in the society:

According to GE teachers, students' reluctance to participate or initiate a turn in the English classroom can be attributed to the following: a lack of confidence in their linguistic competence; cultural barriers; a sense of anxiety; and a non-supportive environment, that is, English is not a medium of instruction nor is it an official language in Indonesia.

H) Teachers' suggestions for ways to increase teacher-student interaction

Both of GE teachers' suggestions for ways to increase interaction can be categorised as out-of-school and within-school suggestions. The former focuses on the Ministry of Education and the National Examination policy. The National Examination policy resulted teaching English to train students to pass the examination rather than developing students' skill in using English for communication. Seventy eight percent stated that the policy should be reviewed. The latter includes proposals for increasing students' turns in small talk (67%), reducing the number of students in a class (67%), using appropriate media, selecting interesting topics, and motivating students (56%).

4. DISCUSSION

From the interviews with teachers a number of conclusions can be drawn. First, teaching for GE teachers are designed to prepare students for the National Examination. Second, many GE teachers lack knowledge and skills in applying effective classroom interaction strategies. They have received little training in effective teacher-student interaction. Third, there were few tasks provided for teacher-student interaction. Fourth, linguistic incompetence and cultural factors inhibit students from participating in classroom interaction. Fifth, English was not used to maximum effect in classroom interaction. These findings now are examined in more detail.

1. Oral communicative competence in English is not a priority

GE teachers point out that oral communicative competence is not a priority in teaching English in lower secondary schools in Malang. Reading comprehension of various texts is valued because it prepares students for the National Examination which stresses reading comprehension. Oral communicative language proficiency has not been emphasized in the National Examination so that it is not surprising that English teachers have paid more attention to students' reading comprehension. Their belief of their classroom interaction practice seems to be influenced by the external factors (the Education Ministry policy). This finding echoes Breen's [13] and Lacorte's [14] study, that the principles of what content to teach and how they see their role as a teacher were most influenced by situational factors such as assessment requirements and nature of the students.

2. Limited range of teacher-student interaction strategies

The majority of GE teachers employed a small range of strategies. The relatively popular strategies used by most teachers were display questions, extended teacher turn, form focused feedback, and teacher echo. Other strategies were mentioned rarely. These included reference questions, negotiation moves, scaffolding, extended student turn, and content focus feedback.

Use of a limited range of strategies for interaction was mainly was the result of teachers' lack of knowledge of effective strategies. Teachers were more familiar with their traditional role as knowledge transmitters. Teachers indicated that they used display questions to check students' mastery of the knowledge they provided. Extended teachers' turn was also employed to transmit knowledge.

Teachers paid little attention to the following strategies: scaffolding, negotiation moves, student extended turn, referential questions, and content focused feedback. It appears that many teachers are not aware of these strategies. The classroom interaction they devise is based on their own ideas or drawn from their own experiences. Teachers' lack of knowledge and skills in using strategies for interaction can be attributed to the focus of their in-service training that they receive.

3. Limited tasks designed for student-student interaction

Tasks focused mainly on questions and answers based on reading texts. Only a small number of teachers reported providing communicative tasks for student-student interaction. There appear to be several causes of limited student-student interaction. First, teachers do not realize its benefits. Teachers were not aware of the potential of student-student interaction to promote students' oral language.

The second reason was that most teachers do not have the skills to design communicative tasks for student-student interaction. As a result, most teachers were comfortable with the tasks which were prescribed and available in the students' textbooks. These tasks mostly related to reading comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary items. Teachers' lack of skills in promoting student centred learning echoes Maulana et.al's study [2].

4. English (L2) is not used to maximum effect in classroom interaction

GE teachers use a mixture of Indonesian and English in their classrooms. These findings may be explained in terms of teachers' experience as well as the communicative competence of the teacher and their students.

More experienced English teachers (with more than 20 years' experience) learned their English via grammar translation methods. They memorised grammatical patterns through direct instruction. Communicative teaching activities were not cultivated at the time they learned English. As a result, their grammatical knowledge was excellent but they were not confident with their oral communication. Using a mixture of English and Indonesian may suit more experienced teachers.

Another reason is low communicative competence of the teachers. There has been a relatively recent report on teacher communicative competence published by the Director of Quality Improvement for Academic and Non-academic, Ministry of Education, Surya Dharma, MPA, PhD [15]. It revealed that teachers of secondary schools who were involved in teaching into international standard programs have low communicative competence, as indicated by their low score on the Test of English for International Communication (ToEIC). Similar finding is also indicated by Lengkanawati's study [16] and Hamid's study [17].

The last reason for the use of both English and Indonesian is students' poor linguistic competence in English. Some schools have students with high English proficiency. These students usually came from well-to-do families who provide private tuition in English. Other schools may have many students who lack English proficiency because they cannot afford private tuition. In the former, teachers are likely to use more English because the students understand English. In the latter schools, teachers would use more Indonesian because their students understand little English.

5. Linguistic incompetence and cultural factors inhibit students from participating in classroom interaction

Most GE teachers reported that students have lack of confidence in their linguistics competence. Lack of confidence in their linguistic competence echoes studies conducted by Liu & Littlewood [18] and Tomlinson & Dat [19]. Most of GE teachers stated that students were not active in classroom interaction, they tended to be shy and opted not to try to experiment with their English language in classroom interaction. According to GE teachers cultural factors, such as being complete obedient and complete respectful to elders (parents, teachers, community leaders) influenced the students' behaviour in the classroom. Students were brought up to be polite, not to initiate to speak to elders unless they are spoken to, not to challenge the elders by asking critical questions and to do what the elders ask them to do without any protests [6]. The result of this upbringing is passive students. Students did not respond to the teacher presentation or questions unless they are assigned to do so. Students' passivity emerged in studies by Astika [7], Tutyandari [20] and Marchellino [21]

5. CONCLUSIONS

From the findings, it can be concluded that classroom interaction at the respondents' schools has not fully facilitated the development of students' communicative competence. The reasons are teachers' lack of skills to orchestrate effective classroom interaction which promotes students' oral language production. In addition, there are many barriers such as National Examination in which National Examination does not assess students' oral communicative competence, teachers' lack of English proficiency, and large classes. Students do not fully participate in classroom interaction in English because of cultural factor, anxiety, lack of vocabulary and pronunciation skill, and lack of use of English outside the classroom.

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